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ABSTRACT

The composing processes of apprehensive and nonapprehensive college freshmen writers were explored in a case study of two female students. The two students, one a high apprehensive and the other a low apprehensive writer, completed a questionnaire that elicited information about their attitudes toward writing, writing concerns, time spent writing, and other composing habits. The students then wrote two essays (one personal and one expository), on separate days, while being videotaped. After each writing session, the student watched the videotape of her performance and commented on all she could remember about her thoughts, sources for ideas and examples, pauses, word changes, rereadings, revisions, and other pertinent acts. The essays were then analyzed for all the information they conveyed about the composing process of the writers. The results showed many differences between the two students. The apprehensive writer disliked writing and took a great deal of time to complete an assignment, while the nonapprehensive writer enjoyed writing and wrote rapidly. The apprehensive writer paused often during writing and usually wrote only one draft. In contrast, the nonapprehensive writer usually finished a first draft with few pauses, made a few minor changes, and immediately started on a second draft. Only occassionally did she reread the first draft after she began the second or subsequent drafts. (Writing samples are appended.) (FL)

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# Exploring Apprehension: Composing Processes of Apprehensive and Non-Apprehensive Intermediate Freshmen Writers

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Exploring Apprehension: Composing Processes of

Apprehensive and Non-Apprehensive Intermediate Freshmen Writers

> Writing is among the most mysterious of human activities. No one, least of all the psychoanalysts, knows the laws by which it moves or refuses to move. . . . The poem, the story, the essay . . . is already there . . . before a word is ever put to paper; and the act of writing is the act of finding the magical key that will unlock the floodgates and let the flow begin. . . .
>
> --Norman Podhoretz, Making It, quoted in John Braine, Writing a Novel, p. 31.

It is this magical key that often evades the grasp of the basic and intermediate writer, especially the grip of the apprehensive writer. The ideas are there locked behind the doors of the preconscious, and all he has to do is keep trying the keys on the ring until the right one opens the right door. It's usually a laborious and time-consuming task. But when, and if, he succeeds he delightedly discovers, piece by piece, a treasure of forgotten yet valuable information.

The non-apprehensive writer holds a master key to a rare book room furnished with card catalogues listing images, experiences, ideas. Once she lets herself into the room, she quickly pulls open a drawer and plucks out an appropriate idea or phrase. It may not be perfect, but it suffices. Quickly finding what she needs she busily goes on, pausing momentarily now and them to pull and note a new experience.

We might think of the apprehensive writer as a novice custodian of a shadowy, abandoned castle, and the non-apprehensive writer as a

junior research assistant with ready access to the vaulted archives of her own mind, where information appears handily catalogued. Though greatly oversimplified, the analogy capsulizes the different writing strategies of the intermediate writers[1] discussed below. Anna is the apprehensive writer; Nancy is the non-apprehensive writer.

Both Anna and Nancy are students in the Writing Workshop, a basic writing program at The Ohio State University. Students are placed into the Writing Workshop on the basis of a written essay, but most intermediate students have ACT scores between 11 and 15 (roughly equivalent to SAT verbal scores between 330 and 370). Anna and Nancy were chosen to be subjects from among 44 intermediate writers who filled out and returned Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Tests.[2] The Daly-Miller index is a 104 point scale ranging from a low apprehension score of 26 to a high apprehension score of 130. The mean score on the scale for the 44 students was 74.11. Anna and Nancy scored near the extremes, 119 and 32 respectively.

Both students also filled out a Writing Questionnaire, modeled on an exercise in Linda Flower's recent text, Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1981). Its questions allowed us to find out the subjects' attitudes toward writing, their typical and habitual writing concerns, their time spent writing, the mode they most often write in, and their composing habits or rituals.

For the formal protocol analysis, Anna and Nancy agreed to write two essays, on separate days, while being videotaped. In The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders, Janet Emig reports

that when her subjects were given a choice between writing on a reflective (personal, egocentric) topic and an extensive (non-egocentric, expository) topic, they more often chose the extensive topic.[3] The reasons for their choices varied, but most of the twelfth-grade students either found the reflective topic too personal to share, or they lacked adequate time for a particular personal topic or situation to come to mind, incubate, coalesce into meaning or "felt sense,"[4] and finally to become transformed from inchoate feeling into analytical communication. Such mode-specific considerations, it seemed to me, might well precipitate or encourage writing apprehension; that is, non-self-sponsored personal writing might provoke anxiety.

To test the hypothesis, each student was asked to write a fifty-five minute essay in the reflective mode and, some days later, to write a second fifty-five minute essay in the extensive mode. The personal assignment directed the subjects to write an essay in which they explain why a particular word of their own choosing best describes "the real you." No audience was specified. The second assignment required that they write an essay defending or opposing stricter handgun laws. This time they were instructed "to discuss the issue as it relates to American society in general, not just as it relates to your personal experience."

During each writing session, subjects were videotaped and audio-recorded. Although the students were asked before taping began to verbalize orally whatever they were thinking as they were writing, the students felt uncomfortable doing so. In fact, each complained that the oral composing, when they attempted it,

not only made the writing process seem artificial and caused them to feel self-conscious, but it interfered with the inner speech accompanying silent composing. For these students, inner speech or non-verbalized thought is different enough from the analytical process of explaining why and how one writes, that ordering and vocalizing those thoughts come to be as much an obstacle as a window to the composing process. The experimenters did not interrupt the subjects to request they "think aloud" once they started writing.

But to recapture as much of the mental state of the writer writing as possible and to recapture it while the performance was still fresh in the writer's mind, we immediately replayed the videotape showing the student writing and asked her to comment on all she could remember about her thoughts, sources of ideas and examples, her pauses, rereading and rescanning, word changes, revisions, and any other pertinent act. All this we audio-recorded for later analyses. The essays were closely analyzed for number and length of pauses, reason for the pause (if known), number and time-length of rescansions (when determinable), and any other piece of information that might provide a clue to the writer's composing habits. The remainder of the paper discusses the most notable differences between Anna's and Nancy's composing processes.

Anna dislikes writing, probably because it takes her so long. For instance, she indicated on the Writing Questionnaire that she had recently spent 72 hours writing three paragraphs and an essay for her composition class. Much of that time, I suspect, was taken up with incubation or with delaying tactics. Her usual habit to prepare to write is to lie down for about an hour and just think

of ideas for the assigned paper. She seldom writes a piece in a single sitting, but instead works on sections of the paper at a time. For many apprehensive writers, Anna's piecemeal plan relieves anxiety because the writer doesn't feel the pressure to complete an entire assignment in one sitting. Many writers and researchers, including Flowers, suggest setting such subgoals to reduce pressure and alleviate the paralysis of writer's block. But Anna's anxiety increases between sittings. Each time she faces another round of writing, she has to conquer again her fear of the blank page. And the time between bouts tends to increase tension and apprehension, not lessen it--at least not until the paper is almost completed. To compound her anxiety and dislike of writing, she almost always ends up having to write a paper under a tight time constraint.

Non-anxious Nancy enjoys writing, especially when it is self-generated. She writes poetry, letters, has edited a high school newspaper, and even keeps a note pad by her bed. Unlike Anna, Nancy usually writes a paper in one sitting. Oddly enough, like Anna, she often procrastinates. But because she isn't <u>forced</u> to wait until the last minute, she doesn't feel pressured. She likes to have a glass of red wine and a spacious table when she writes, a ritual she learned from her father, who writes a great deal.

Since both writers often write under pressure, their composing processes might be compared to a forced march. Their itineraries, though, are very different.

Before Nancy begins to write, she rereads the question and formulates a sense of what the topic asks her to do. She often

starts off by echoing some part of the question, but after she gets started, she clips through the first draft. She often stops at the end of a sentence, rescans briefly, goes on, stops for a longer pause at the end of a paragraph, and hurriedly finishes the draft. Then she rereads the entire draft, makes a change or two in spelling or diction, or even adds phrases and "chunks" of discourse. With almost no hesitation, she begins the second draft, which opens with a more unified thesis. When she's ready to begin the final draft, which may be the second, third, or fourth draft, she begins by copying the opening lines of the previous draft, but soon continues anew, only occasionally rereading sections of previous drafts, but often glancing back. This final draft goes quickest of all. If she likes what she's written, she will proofread; if she doesn't, she won't. (This is also true for Anna.) Nancy finished the first (reflective) assignment in 31 minutes, the second (extensive) in 38½ minutes, on both occasions well ahead of the deadline. A very quick march.

Anna, on the other hand, always wrote only one draft. Her journey is often interrupted by pauses, most of them relatively brief (under 15 seconds), but often reflecting some degree of stress. Nevertheless, the pauses seem well used, for she takes time to search for the right verb, the appropriate subordinating conjunction, the workable syntax, or pauses to reread. Like Mike the apprehensive basic writer described by Professor Lotto,[5] she waits for the nebulousness of her felt sense to coalesce into words. But she also bemoans her inability to put into words what she wants to communicate. Also like Mike, she is restricted

by inflexible expectations of what good writing should be. She strains for the exact word (though she often fails to find it); she doesn't go on until she has found a formal topic sentence or example; she often returns to the assigned topic to insure she is responding to the topic; and she will not sopt writing before the expiration of the time allows her to stop. Anna's composing process is much more rigid than Nancy's flexible, loose, unstressful approach.

As Table 1 illustrates, Nancy's forced-march writing travels at a much quicker pace than Anna's. When writing her first essay, Nancy produced in her two drafts a total of 658 words in 31 minutes, an average of just over 21 words per minute. She spent most of her time writing, pausing only 40% of the total time. On the same topic, Anna wrote for 55 minutes on a single draft that was 594 words long, averaging just under 11 words a minute--about half as many words per minute as Nancy. Even though each paused once every 30 to 32 seconds, because Anna used the full time to write and because her mean pause length averaged five seconds longer than Nancy's, her total pausing time was much greater than Nancy's. Anna paused 60% of her total time, compared to Nancy's 40%.

The numbers were only a little different for the second essays, on gun control. Nancy wrote for 38½ minutes, producing four drafts and a total of 618 words--about 17 words a minute. She paused only 35% of the time, about once every 27 seconds. Her mean pause length was just under 8 seconds. Anna wrote one draft of 525 words in 54 minutes, for an average of 9.5 words a minute. She paused about every 24 seconds, averaging 11.5 seconds per pause. She divided her time almost equally between pausing and writing. Over all,

TABLE 1

| Writer | Topic | Total Writing Time | Number of Pauses | Seconds Between Pauses | Mean Pause Length (Seconds) | Percent of Time Writing | Percent of Time Pausing | Words per Minute | Number of Drafts | Total Words in Drafts | Total Words in Final Draft |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Non-anxious Nancy | 1 | 31 min. | 58 | 32.07 | 12.83 | 60% | 40% | 21.2 | 2 | 658 | 282 |
| | 2 | 38½ min. | 104 | 22.21 | 7.77 | 65% | 35% | 16.8 | 4 | 618 | 224 |
| Anxious Anna | 1 | 55 min. | 110 | 30.00 | 18.00 | 40% | 60% | 10.8 | 1 | 594 | 594 |
| | 2 | 54 min. | 133 | 24.36 | 11.45 | 53% | 47% | 9.5 | 1 | 525 | 525 |

non-apprehensive Nancy spends less time pausing and more time writing than anxious Anna, so, not surprisingly, Nancy produces more words per minute. But Nancy also finishes an assignment well before time expires, so her generating almost twice the number of words per minute as Anna implies a striking difference between their writing processes.

In her forced march, Nancy travels great verbal distances--around 650 total words. But by going her circuitous route, she arrives, in her final draft, only 250 words away from her original zero-starting point. Anna's slower paced march traverses fewer total words, but proceeds in a relatively straight line, directly from point of origin (0 words) to destination (about 550 words).

While a straight line is the shortest distance between two points, that unvarying route is seldom the best one--even for a forced march. One has to consider the ruggedness of the terrain, the rivers that are slow or impossible to cross, the positions of the enemy, and the time-consuming detours to pick up reinforcements. So too is writing a circuitous process, not a linear sequence of steps that run from planning to writing to revising. Most writers do some of their actual writing as they prewrite, revise as they write, and invent even as they revise. That's what Anna does to a lesser extent and Nancy to a much greater one.

As Nancy writes, she feels the need to explore various possibilities--new terrain--where she picks up fresh ideas, leaves others behind that are too weakly developed or that serve traitorously irrelevant purposes, and rejects still others that are too complex and too undiscliplined to gain control over in the given assignment

and time limit. And in her freewriting and revisions, she circles back to recapture ideas or to relocate them. In the end, though, she suffices with a few adequately chosen words and ideas, but after traveling only one-half to one-third the straight-line distance Anna travels with her larger army of words. In her forced march, Anna pre-plans very little, preferring to make tactical decisions as she goes. She deals with the blocked ideas, the building of bridges, and with the ever-present pressure of Enemy Time all as she pushes forward in a constant start-and-stop march straight through her only draft.

Certainly Anna's single-draft essays are more fully developed than Nancy's brief final drafts. In organization and coherence, they are about equal in quality. But Anna's development has been exacted at a high price. She finds writing extremely difficult and stressful, and she dislikes doing it. Nancy finds writing to come fairly easily, and she is rarely under stress because she is much more flexible in her choice of options: When she's stuck, she might plow on to another idea, she might begin again, or she might just quit. All these options, along with her practice in writing, increase her confidence in the act. Writing samples from Nancy and Anna, along with notations on pauses as they wrote, can be found in the appendix.

If writing seems to come too hard for Anna, it might well come too easily for Nancy. John Freund lucidly argues in an article entitled "Entropy and Composition" that the hard work of writing cannot happen without some increase in entropy or disorder.[6] The second law of thermodynamics states that when heat is converted

into another form of energy, for each unit of usable energy produced by that conversion, a compensatory amount of unusable energy is also released, which is entropy. Another way to define this undirected energy would be to call it chaos, disorder, confusion--or stress when it occurs in the mind of a writer. The purpose of writing is to shape the meaningless chaos of unformed thought into structured and meaningful communication, that is, to decrease entropy and confusion. But order cannot be created without a reciprocal increase in disorder. For writers, that means not without some degree of confusion and anxiety. In the case of Anna, the entropy manifests itself both in the process of creating order (in the mental and psychological stress of writing) and in the shaped product (the grammatical and rhetorical features of the piece). For her reader, the relatively high level of disorder and the concommitant low level of meaning are the most striking and most frustrating characteristics of Anna's text. But for Anna, it is the mental and psychological chaos out of which the designed message is finally created that causes acute and at times paralyzing frustration. As Professor Freund points out, there is a reciprocal relationship between the creation and its creating: "in general the more successfully composers achieve reductions in entropy in the different levels of the composition (e.g., the lexical, the syntactic, or the semantic), the more the effects of the compensatory increase are felt as stress in their physical systems . . ." (p. 504). Because Anna tries so hard to write a perfect first draft, she experiences greater anxiety (high entropy) than Nancy, who prefers psychological calm (low entropy) to perfect first drafts.

Nancy orders the chaos a little at a time, draft by draft, and so alleviates anxiety. Thus her need to write multiple drafts to arrive finally at controlled meaning.

Although we usually think of stress as a block to thinking and writing, stress can also stimulate creativity. The condition of disorder often allows for the free play of the creative imagination to test numerous options in diction, syntax, arrangement, and hundreds of other concerns of the writer. If not for those agonizingly messy times when a writer suffers through, sorts out, arranges, and rearranges the barrage of cognitive and affective impressions, there would be no creation. To convert the raw material of disparate thought into effective communication is a messy part of the thinking and writing process. We all do it. But as the examples of Anna and Nancy illustrate, anxious and non-anxious writers seem to go about doing it in different ways. In her start-and-stop fashion, Anna puts a great deal of pressure on the machinery of her mind and nervous system. She gains a product in a single draft, but she pays an exacting and stressful price. Because of the strain and fatigue, she produces only when she has to. Nancy, in her non-stop mode, runs through a number of experimental drafts and models before she arrives at a salable product. She works smoothly, evenly, on a relatively low level of stress. Thus, unlike Anna, she is rarely so overtaxed that she cannot produce at will.

Or to return to the metaphor with which I began this presentation, the keys of the imagination are tried, doors unlocked, and options chosen or rejected according to their applicability. The state of entropy is like a dark and confusing castle of rusty doors,

or like the special collection room that houses neatly catalogued and cross-referenced images and ideas. As the writer attempts to create meaning out of chaos, he or she has to allow for the increase of confusion--either in the written product where it is manifested as garbled communication, or in the anxious mind of the writer. Hemingway summed it up as succinctly as Jock Ewing could: "Writing is damned hard work."

## Appendix of Writing Samples

Following are two one-page transcripts from Anna's and Nancy's reflective essays.

The circled numbers indicate the point at which the writer paused and the time in seconds or, when a colon appears, in minutes and seconds the pause lasted.

I had to go just (21) To prove to myself that it was shy about speaking in front of (31) the class.

Being shy, (9) which I knew I was. I always tried to prove that I wasn't. (24) I remember that in high school and all while I was growing up (13) I said to myself (2) that I wasn't shy (25) and I wasn't going to act shy (3) which (2) I never prove. Because (4:27) up to this day I'm still afraid to speak in front of a crowd. (2:06) I had to (3) I don't know (2) why that I of 10 brothers and sisters I had to be the (1) only one (11) which is shy. (42) I always (3) tried to not to act (2) it but was (65) never able to no matter how I try (2) I try everything (3) to break away from this habit. (4) For example, (1) I would stand (10) in front of the mirror and tell myself that I had to break (2) away. (5) I was determine to break this habit. (1:44) I would watch my sisters and (2) the way they act with the way they shy wasn't afraid to speak in front (19)

ride him like a horse - of course, if I can put him in that position - (2)
We sit and laugh and carry on. (6) In other words we have a terrible time in being together..

(39) I am a very shy person, (4) so if I tried to communicate my feelings and actions as I am with Grace, I try to do it (5) in a (5) charming way, that it does not become heavy and draggy (2) in what I have to say. (5) From what I have been told, it's a very cute way of doing things and it grabs the attention of the person, in which I am trying to convey (2) my thoughts (2)

Going back to my past. (4) The other evening I had many things [illegible]

## Notes

[1]For a description of the intermediate writer, as contrasted with the basic and advanced writer, see Mina P. Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing (New York: Oxford Press, 1977), pp. 198-210.

[2]John A. Daly and Michael D. Miller, "The Empirical Development of an Instrument to Measure Writing Apprehension," Research in the Teaching of English, 9 (Winter 1975), 242-56.

[3]Janet Emig, The Composing Processes of Twelfth-Graders, Research Report No. 13 (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1971), pp. 46-54, 79-84, 91-92, et passim.

[4]Although the term "felt sense" was coined by Eugene Gendlin, Focusing (New York: Everest House, 1978), pp. 35, 165, I use the term as Sondra Perl defines it in "Understanding Composing," College Composition and Communication, 31 (Dec. 1980), 363-69. Professor Perl at one point characterizes "felt sense" as "feelings or non-verbalized perceptions that surround the words, or . . . what the words already present evoke in the writer. . . . When writers are given a topic, the topic itself evokes a felt sense in them. This topic calls forth images, words, ideas, and vague fuzzy feelings that are anchored in the writer's body. . . . When writers pause, when they go back and repeat key words, what they seem to be doing is waiting, paying attention to what is still vague and unclear.

They are looking to their felt experience, and waiting for an image, a word, or a phrase to emerge that captures the sense they embody" (p. 365).

[5]Edward E. Lotto, "Defining the Problem: Composing Strategies of Apprehensive and Non-Apprehensive Basic Writers," Session A-12, Conference on College Composition and Communication, Dallas, 26 March 1980.

[6]John Freund, "Entropy and Composition," College English, 41 (Jan. 1980), 493-516.